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ABSTRACT

An understanding of an author's structure of ideas assists readers in comprehending a text. Three kinds of writing activities relate to a reading comprehension subskill. (1) sequencing--the logical presentation of events, times, places, ideas or steps in a procedure to accomplish a task or to comprehend an event--for which a teaching progression might include self-relating, double-cued, text-supported, and varied sequences; (2) "inferencing"--the educated guess based on information that has limited availability or on information that may even be inaccurate; and (3) predicting--students are given information concerning a situation and asked to suggest a variety of possible results or consequences that could arise. Their suggestions would be based on limited textual information but supplemented by as much experiential knowledge as students could bring to the situation. These activities would give students opportunities to use their personal knowledge and experiences to apply techniques used by authors to express and organize their ideas. Through this kind of personally involved writing, students may be sensitized to text structures that may aid in comprehending written materials. (Each writing activity is followed by suggested exercises.) (HOD)

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Writing Composition Enhances Reading Comprehension

Janet T. Gold

A Workshop Presented at the

Annual Meeting of the

College Reading Association

Louisville, KY

October 29-31, 1981

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Writing Composition Enhances Reading Comprehension

(This paper is the script of a workshop presented at the College Reading Association conference in Louisville, KY.,October 1981. The contents of the workshop are an elaboration of an earlier paper of the same title available from ERIC Clearinghouse for Reading and Communication. Used within the workshop script were portions of a manuscript of a book that more fully develops the idea of using writing composition to reinforce reading comprehension skills within the classroom reading program.)

Rationale

Reading and writing are two basic communication skills. There is much evidence of a close relationship between these two (Applebee, 1977; Lehr, 1981; Shanahan, 1980; Wilson, 1981). Because both reading and writing are mostly concerned with ways in which meaning can be expressed and constructed (Elkind, 1976; Lehr, 1981), activities that work with the organization and re-organization of the structure (Danner, 1976; Ribovich, 1977; Rubin, 1980; Stein & Trabasso, in press;) should lead readers to a greater understanding of the ways in which authors structure their ideas to make it easier for readers to understand their meanings (Anderson & Armbruster, in press; Johnson & Mandler, 1980; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Ribovich, 1977; Shurcliff, 1978). This understanding of the author's structure of ideas assists readers to a better comprehension of the text (Black & Bower, 1980; Markman, 1977, 1979).

Purpose of Workshop

During this workshop a number of writing composition activities will be given. Each of these activities will clearly relate to a reading comprehension subskill which will be discussed briefly in some introductory comments, clarified by giving definitions of the subskills, and finally reinforced by writing activities involving the workshop participants.

Definitions

Prior to introducing the reading-writing activities two definitions must be stated as bases for further thinking.

Reading comprehension is the process of getting personal meaning from the printed message of an author. This means that the reader is probably bringing a certain amount of personal knowledge or experience to the text to enable understanding. The closer the text matches that prior knowledge the more likely the content of the passage is comprehensible to the reader.

This kind of a definition of reading comprehension leaves the educational world with an amorphic ball - one with which it is very difficult to deal especially when applied to the practicalities of the classroom. What has happened, therefore, is that a set of subskills of reading comprehension have been developed from what apparently is involved in this task of comprehending text. Such a set of subskills appears to help make teaching students to understand what they have read in a passage more manageable.

Writing composition, on the other hand, is concerned with putting personal meaning into print. Thus the students' knowledges and experiences are the

bases for their own written products. The various aspects of handwriting, spelling, grammar, and punctuation are of minor concern here unless their misuse is hindering the communication of the message.

What we have, therefore, as our definitional bases are reading comprehension as a meaning receiving process and writing composition as a meaning communicating process. Each process complimenting the other is the foundation of the reader-writer's personal resources of knowledge and experience.

Problem and Its Significance

The complimentary writing composition activities that are to be presented here are designed to sensitize students to techniques authors use to structure their ideas to make their writings more understandable. This sensitization will be approached through student-production of examples of the various techniques used by authors.

This workshop has presented several writing composition activities that will give students opportunities to use their personal knowledge and experiences to apply techniques used by authors to express and organize their ideas. It was proposed here that through this kind of personally involved writing students may be sensitized to text structures that may aid in comprehending reading materials.

Sequencing

An understanding of sequencing is necessary for students to comprehend a variety of school related information as arithmetic problems, cause and effect relationships in historical events, following written directions, and interpreting a story, a play, a novel, or a poem.

The ability to sequence appears to be developmental paralleling the experential background of students. Students use previous experiences to assist them to give expected possible outcomes of what to do next. Thus when teaching the initial lessons in sequencing the order should be irreversible as time-relations and have only three or four items. As students demonstrate mastery at these early stages the number of items may be increased or the variables may be changed to include events that may be ordered interchangeably or in accordance with a particular segment of text. Abilities to arrange three or four pictures through mid-elementary years is sufficient. Five items through the late elementary is good. More items without direct use of the text is far too complicated and really quite unrealistic at any level.

Students must be assisted to see the logic of a sequence. This logic must make sense to them personally, not just because the teacher says it does or should. The logic of time, ideas, events, steps in a procedure, changes in size, or places should be discussed with the class as various criteria for sequencing. Examples where clue words as first, next, before, then, after, and finally are used should be shared.

The teacher needs to also make the students aware that some literary styles do not follow a strict sequence pattern nor do some events in life. The concept of sequence variability should not be formally presented to the students until they are ready to understand it. When it is time to introduce it clear examples should be used, perhaps examples the students themselves could suggest as getting ready for school in the morning or walking to school. The first example of getting ready for school has several items that could be interchanged and still accomplish getting ready. The second example of walking to school must be done in a set order or the student may never arrive.

A teaching progression that may be of some assistance when planning lessons or units in sequencing is as follows:

1. Self-relating sequence

   Give the students opportunity to write time lines giving several statements about incidents in their lives. Help them to arrange them in order. This activity can be adjusted to be far more complex for the older students. Time lines of this sort make sequencing very personal. It also gives the students a very real sense of what sequencing is.

2. Double-cued sequence

   Have pictures and scripts that match each other. Allow the students to sequence the events either with the pictures and the script, the pictures alone, or the script alone.

3. Text supported sequence

   Share a short passage with the class where sequence is clearly stated. See if they can discover its order and repeat it orally. Refer them to the text to prove the accuracy of the recall.

4. Varied sequence

Share clear examples of pictures or literature where sequence can be varied without loss of understanding of the message content. Since this is the most complex phase of sequencing the students should be assisted in understanding the logic criteria used to order the items in the selection.

Materials used to illustrate sequence must be carefully selected. Far too often materials are too complex for the students' abilities. Pictures or reading selections should clearly show a progression. They should cue the students to anticipate what the next change or step will be.

A great classroom collection could be made of those things discovered by the students that must be done in order, or at a higher level those things that have variable sequences but all the items must be done to accomplish the task. This collection could be made into a book for use in the classroom library.

As sequences are discovered in shared literature the class should discuss the importance of it to the story and how the story would be different if this order were not maintained.

The following activities will help students to realize the importance of maintaining sequence and the possibility of variations:

—— Display a large stimulating picture before the class Ask the students to look at the items shown for a moment. Have the students write on a piece of scratch paper the first three to five items they looked at - this could include certain details or an overall impression of the picture.

Discuss with the class how differently they viewed the picture in relation to sequence. Ask the class to verbally view the picture by describing items from the left side to the right side, from top to bottom. or from major to minor. Emphasize that there is an order to the items depending on the point of view of the observer.

After the class seems comfortable with the concept of sequencing observations have them describe a picture independently. Let them share their descriptions with a friend to see if the friend can discern the direction of the observation by using the sequence of the descriptions.

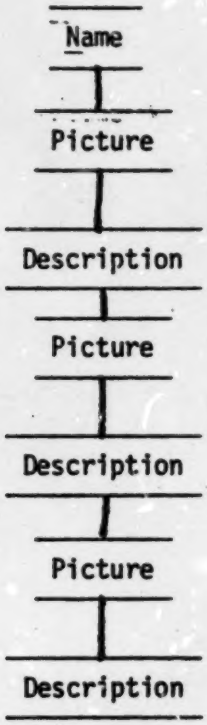
After having the students write a paragraph of about five or six sentences, give each student sentence-sized strips of paper so one sentence can be written on each strip. Have the students mix the strips so the sentences are no longer in their proper order. Ask the students to try to unscramble the sentence strips of a friend.

Some of the paragraphs will be very easily unscrambled. Others may be very difficult. This activity will point out the necessity of sequence in some selections but not in others, and the helpfulness of sequence cueing words as next, then, or finally.

-- By using pictures cut from magazines have the students construct individual "lifelines" showing the important events of their lives. Discuss the logic of arranging them in some kind of order.

The students should write a paragraph describing each incident. Encourage the use of sequencing cue words as: at the start, first (to show the beginning); next, the, after a while (to show medial incidents); and, in the end, finally, at last (to show ending).

Make single strand mobiles displaying the lifelines for each student. Start with the student's name, then the first picture, next its description probably mounted on a card, and so on until all pictures and explanations are on the line.



-- Together write a set of directions for accomplishing a simple task as brushing teeth. Put each step on a strip of paper so it can be easily manipulated. When the directions appear to be complete discuss the importance of sequence in some directions. Move the strips of paper around to show, instances where it is very important that ster s given in directions are follwed in order. It should be pointed out that sometimes directions do not need to be followed in their exact order. This can also be shown by manipulating the steps in the directions the class dictated earlier.

-- When the students appear comfortable with the idea of steps in directions and their sequence, have them write their own directions for a simple task. This could be done independently or with a friend.

-- Display a simple map for the class to see. Explain how important sequence is when giving directions to someone who is lost or going to a new place. Practice with the students giving oral directions using the displayed map.

Challenge the students to either use the same map or draw one of their own to give a clear set of written directions that would allow an individual to find the way from one place to another.

-- Ask the students to write a set of places that go together in some kind of sequence. This set may be as simple as the various places they pass to go home from school. A more difficult version may be to describe the set of places visited on a vacation. A real challenge could be for the students to relate their own "Around the World in Eighty Days" trip.

A map or globe with strings connecting marker pins next to the student's descriptions would make a very effective display. Illustrations of each place visited would also be very nice.

— Prior to this writing activity ask the students to bring in a three or four picture cartoon strip.

When all the students have a cartoon strip, introduce the lesson by discussing the fact that each picture in the strip is part of a set sequence. Seldom can the pictures be rearranged and make much sense.

Have the students write the story told in their cartoon. Each picture in the strip could be described in a separate paragraph. Suggest

they use sequence cue words as first, then, after that, or finally.

Mount the finished products (cartoon strip at the top, written description at the bottom) for an effective display of the student's work.

-- Take one or two of the class's favorite jokes and write them on strips of paper so that one sentence of the joke is on each strip. Have the joke read aloud in its correct sequence. Now rearrange the sentences. Have the joke read aloud again. Discuss with the class how keeping the incidents in order is important in a joke.

Have the students work with a friend to write an original joke where the order of the events is important.

-- Review with the students that many directions must be followed in a set order. Have the class suggest possible examples and discuss the consequences of not following the sequence.

Have the students write a simple set of directions for some activity. Write each step of the procedure on a sentence strip.

As the students finish their sentence strips have them mix them up; then give them to a friend who is to arrange them in the correct order.

The written products from this activity would make a very good set of manipulatives for a learning center on sequence. (The center could be adapted for a following directions activity by having the students accomplish what they are directed to do.)

Sequencing involves a certain logical presentation of events, times, places, ideas or steps in a procedure to accomplish a task or to comprehend an event. Students need to learn that there are times when a sequence must be followed in order to accomplish a task. They must also

be aware of the fact that some activities or events may have variable orders by which they may still be satisfactorily accomplished.

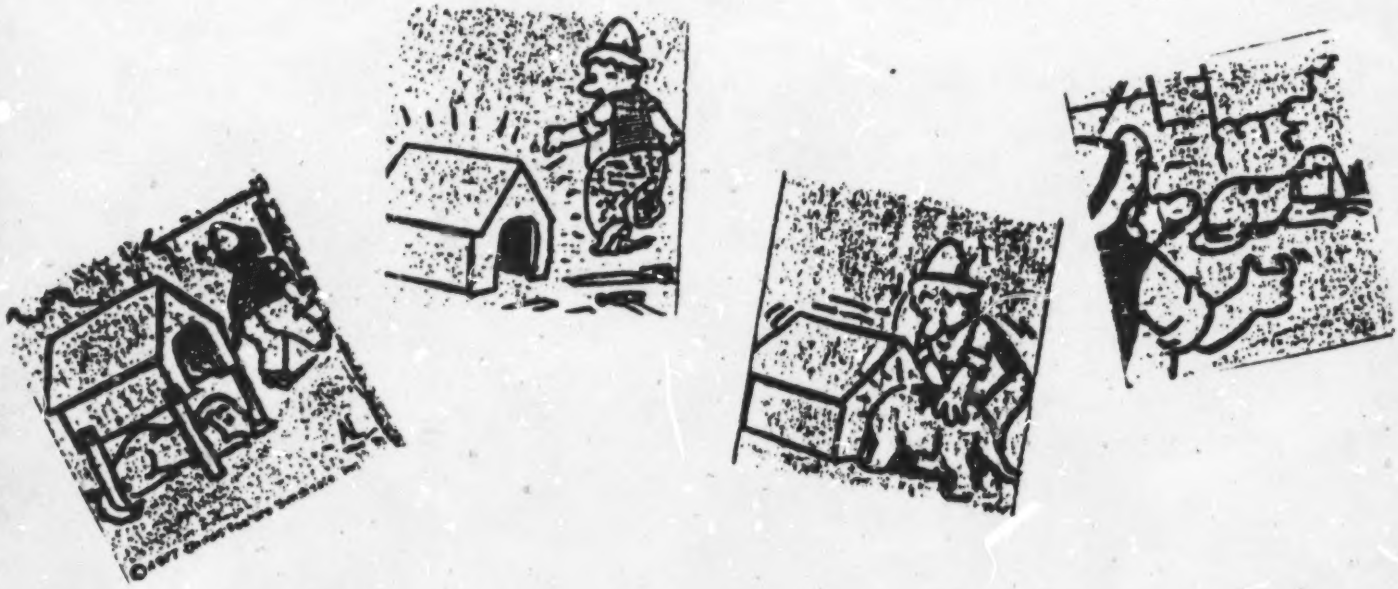
SEQUENCING

Definition:

Sequencing is a procedure that involves the realization that some items must appear or be presented in a logical order. This order may be dictated by time, place, events, ideas, or steps in a procedure.

Directions:

Please arrange these pictures in the order you think they should be. As you do this write why you decided this order is correct.



When you have finished writing please share with someone near you the sequence as you believe it should be.

(Allow time.)

Are there any sequences from the group that you would like to share?

I have two young friends who have done this activity for me.

Here are their suggestions:

Michael:

Here's what I think. Comic strip #1 was a toss up between 1 and 2 but I finally decided. The man built the dog house. Then went to get the dog. He brought the dog to the dog house but the dog didn't fit. So he put stilts on the dog house.

Tyson:

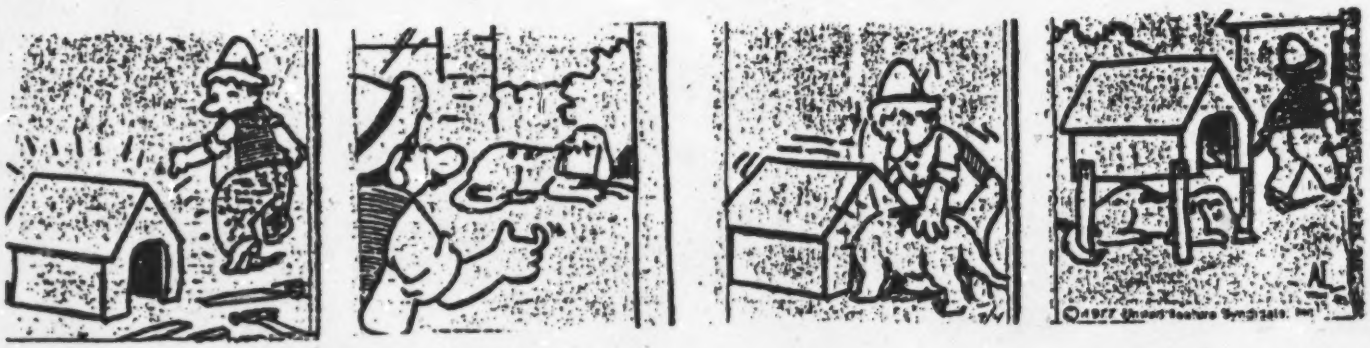
He built the dog house.

He called the dog over.

The dog didn't fit.

He put stilts on the dog house.

Here finally is the artist's version of the correct sequence:



Inferencing

Inferencing is reading between the lines. It is the educated guess based on information that has limited availability or on information that may even be inaccurate. Due to a deficit in the information or its imprecision making an inference may be in all actuality jumping to a conclusion. A conclusion is based on all the necessary information. An inference requires students to go beyond the reading material to hypothesize about missing details, non-explicit main ideas, sequences either between instances or beyond the text, or comparisons not stated between characters, time, and places.

The quality of the inference is determined by the strength of the evidence on which the inference is based. Students need help in gaining as much information as possible then weighing it for its relative accuracy before making any decisions.

Carefully structured lessons that allow for much class discussion will assist students in developing their inferencing skills.

-- Ask the students to select their favorite story character - one they feel they know a great deal about or can pretty well guess the character's inner thoughts. The students are to write a series of "I believe..." statements completed as they think their story character would do it.

A list of possible subjects may be helpful to get the students started. As a class generate a few suggestions such as opinions about trees and forests, some peoples' treatment of others, or other such topics of interest to the students or relevant to the class' curriculum.

Students should be asked for their reasonings behind what they have inferred about the character's beliefs. This could be done through discussion or written as a supporting paragraph for each statement.

-- Display a picture of a setting of interest to the class.

Ask the students to write themselves into that setting telling their reasons for being there and doing what they are doing. From the setting and their own knowledge they should also be able to at least answer questions that reflect how, when, where, why and what?

After the introductory activity of putting themselves into the setting suggest they use what they know about people in general and their favorite character in particular to make inferences as to how that character would respond to the same setting.

Class discussion sharing all the inferences about the various characters could be very interesting. Small group discussions may be possible if several students selected the same character.

Display possibilities arise out of the setting and groupings of the personal responses to the setting, then the favorite character responses to the same.

-- Give the students a selection of from three to five paragraphs about a character and/or a story with which they are familiar. Ask them to read the selection and write several inferences that may be reasonably made from what is given in the selection and what the students know of the character or the story.

Inferences should center on greater details about the character's personality, feelings, and motivations as drawn from the given information within the story or the students' knowledge of people in general.

A discussion is an excellent way to assist students in verbalizing their reasons for feeling the inferences they made were based on what is known.

Prior to the discussion by way of preparation for it students may be asked to write their reasonings in paragraph form.

-- Start this lesson by discussing the fine art of "people watching". This art involves the careful and discrete observation of people being people wherever they are found doing whatever they do. Areas where large groups of people gather or where there is a lot of action are particularly good for "people watching". Since the classroom is somewhat limited in its "watching" possibilities a collection of pictures or movies showing people doing and being may be a good substitute.

As a class observe one of the pictures or films collected and discuss the people. Students are to use their own knowledge of people to infer everything possible and reasonable.

Summarize the discussion on the chalkboard listing general characteristics observed as clothing, involvement in the activity, or emotions readily displayed. Specific inferences drawn about the individuals need not be written since this may be too leading to the students during their independent writing.

After the discussion the students are asked to write a character analysis of an individual pictured. They may follow the general characteristics listed earlier by the class but should feel free to add more of their own, especially the inner thinking of the person.

These independent character studies may be done using single pictures exclusively viewed by one student or perhaps a large group of people where each student is asked to select one individual to study.

Willing students should be allowed to share their studies with the class orally. Displays showing the pictures, if possible, next to the description of the individual would make a good summarizing activity.

-- Initiate this lesson by writing a single line of dialogue from a story familiar to the whole class on the chalkboard. Discuss with the students the story occurences and characters that surround this statement. Together read between the lines to infer what this individual character is thinking and why the statement was made or even why the words were selected in this manner. Help the students clearly state their reasoning.

When the class is apparently comfortable or has completed its comments about this line, have them select single lines of dialogue from their favorite stories. They are to write independently what they feel they can reasonably infer about this character and the surrounding situation.

Allow the students to share their inferences with a friend. This sharing would be most effective if the friends have chosen the same character. It would not matter necessarily if the story or the line of dialogue were different.

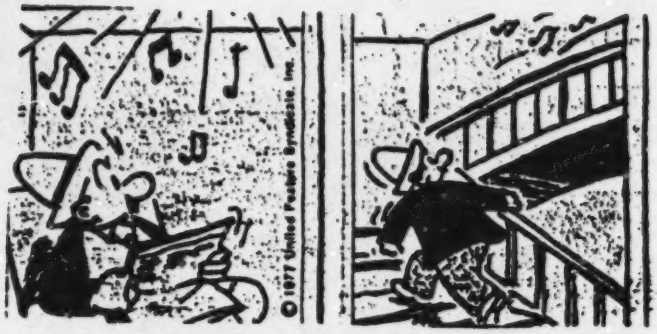
Inferencing

Definition:

Inferencing: Inferencing is reading between the lines. It is the educated guess based on information that has limited availability or on information that may even be inaccurate.

Directions:

Please look only at the pictures you are given. Write what you think happens in the picture that is missing so they all make sense together.



When you have finished writing please share with someone near you what you believe fits into the blank space.

(Allow time.)

Are there any inferences from the group that you would like to share?

I have two examples from my young friends telling what they each think should be in the blank.

Here are their suggestions:

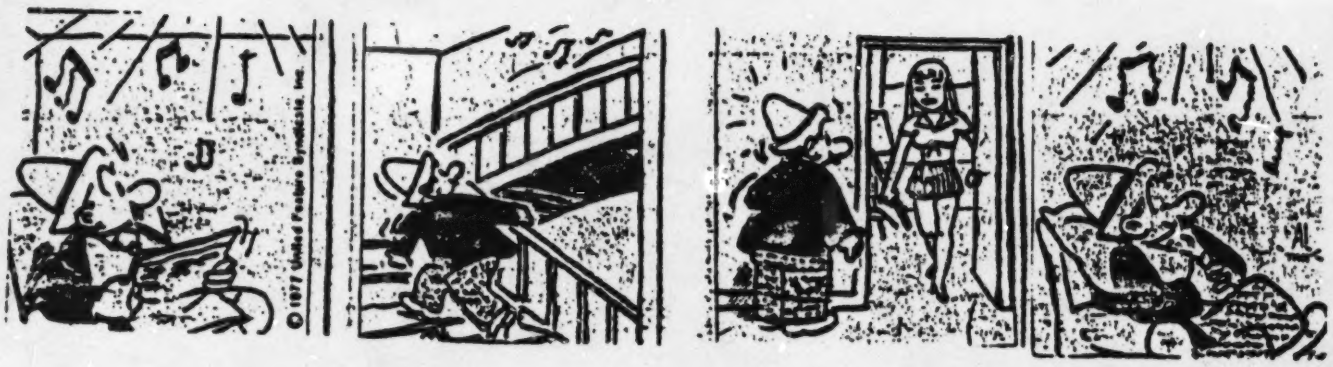
Michael:

Here's what I think about comic strip #2. The man hears music but does not know why there is music. So he walks up the stairs and finds a bird singing so he goes down stairs and enjoys the music.

Tyson:

A guy is playing the drums and he doesn't like the music. He walks upstairs. He asks the guy to play a lullaby. He walks back downstairs and falls asleep.

When sharing the artist's version of what goes into the space, point out to the students that it is only one opinion. Their ideas are quite valid when based on good reasoning.



Predicting

In predicting students are given information concerning a situation and asked to suggest a variety of possible results or consequences that could arise. These suggestions are based on limited textual information but supplemented by as much experiential knowledge as students can bring to the situation. Students who have been exposed to many books and much literature will more than likely be able to visualize the characters and actions of the story and therefore make more accurate predictions. This is due to the supplemental effect on experience books and literature may have.

-- Give the students either the title only or a few illustrations from a story unknown to them, perhaps taken from a reader not their own.

In a paragraph (or several in the case of the pictures) ask the students to write what they believe the story is about using only minimal information you have given them.

After the students are finished writing have them read the story to see how close they are to what the author said. Discuss with them their accuracy of inaccuracy of their predictions in comparison to the author's opinion of what did happen. Suggest to the class that even though their predictions may be different from the author's version

it still could be a possible outcome and discuss the logic of this.

-- Give the class the ingredients to make something to eat. This edible item should be something fairly common such as a stew, meatloaf, or ice cream. Ask them to examine the ingredients carefully. Then have them write first, what they think they can make using these ingredients; secondly, why they think it is possible to make that; thirdly, how would they specifically go about doing it including what further information is needed.

Have recipe books available where the students can check their predictions.

An excellent follow-through activity, of course, would be to actually make the dish.

-- Before doing this activity collect enough single frame cartoons for each student in the class to have one. Using cartoons whose characters are familiar to the students will help.

Have the students mount the cartoon at the top of their papers. Below the picture they are to predict what will happen next based on what they see in the picture and already know about the characters. In their predictions the students should include why they believe they are right.

When they are finished writing their thoughts of what could happen have them share their predictions and reasoning with a friend, who may think differently. Have them discuss their thinking to see that they both could be right.

-- Discuss with the class how the best predictions about what is going to happen is based on what has occurred earlier.

On the top half of their papers have the students describe a

character. An imaginary character would be best. Include this person's likes/dislikes, habits, and general attitude toward life. Tell how this individual responds to anger, fear, frustration, love or other strong emotions suggested by the class. Fill the top half of the paper.

When the class has finished their descriptions with the paper folded have each student trade with a friend. Without looking at what is already on the paper have the students describe a setting. Ask that they be as thorough as possible and fill the second half of the paper. When this is done trade the paper with a different friend.

As a class list several possible problems of interest to the students. Keep the problems general enough to allow for several different solutions.

Have the students then read the description of the character and setting given on the paper they now possess. The students should then select one of the listed problems and predict in a third paragraph how they would expect that character in that setting to solve that problem.

A possible follow-through lesson would have the students share what they have written. This could be done with the whole class but it may prove more interesting to see what was done with the character descriptions, then the setting descriptions that the students wrote but could not use themselves.

Predicting

Definition:

Predicting: In predicting students are given information concerning a situation and asked to suggest a variety of possible results or consequences that could arise. These suggestions are based on limited textual information but supplemented by as much experiential knowledge as students can bring to the situation.

Directions:

Please look only at the picturas you are given. Write what you think happens next. As you tell what happens next please include why you think that is possible.

When you have finished writing please share with someone near you what you believe happens to complete the cartoon.

(Allow time.)

My two young friends give the following suggestions for completing the story:

Michael:

Here's what I think about comic strip #3. The man is reading a book to his son to make him go to sleep. But instead it makes him go to sleep. So the boy walks down stairs and watches TV.

Tyson:

It was a boring story so he falls asleep and the little boy picks up the book and put it back and he went to watch TV.

Are there suggestions from the group as to possible endings to the story based on what has already been given?

Here now is the entire cartoon strip as drawn by the artist:

Summary

This workshop has presented several writing composition activities that will give students opportunities to use their personal knowledge and experiences to apply techniques used by authors to express and organize their ideas. It was proposed here that through this kind of personally involved writing students may be sensitized to text structures that may aid in comprehending written materials.

Handout

The attached handout was given following the presentation. Different comprehension subskills are defined and reinforced by writing composition activities so as not to duplicate those presented within the workshop.

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Writing Composition Enhances Reading Comprehension

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This presentation is based on an article to appear in ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills and a manuscript for a book entitled Writing Activities to Enhance Reading Comprehension

The foundation of the writing activities designed to enhance reading comprehension is the clarity of the definition of the reading skill.

The following are some exemplary definitions and accompanying writing activities for a few reading comprehension skills.

1. Paraphrasing is a process where the original words of the author are transformed into the words of the reader. The meaning of the passage is faithfully maintained though the length may be slightly altered.
   A. Have several sets of directions for assembling things available to the class. Such directions can come from toys, fixtures of some sort, or small kits for models. Have the students rewrite the directions, trying to improve on the manner used by the manufacturer.
   B. Using their favorite jokes, either taken from memory or classroom jokebooks, ask the students to paraphrase the jokes being careful to maintain the same story line, only in their own or different words. Thus, "What is the difference between an elephant and a grape?" becomes "What is the contrast between a pachyderm and a reconstituted raisin?"

2. In summarizing a passage students are asked to shorten its length while keeping the essence of the content.
   A. Divide the class according to the television programs they had watched the evening before. Ask the students to summarize the content of the program. When they are finished, have them compare their summaries to those in the local newspapers or TV Guide.
   B. Discuss with the class the content of a well-known story, such as "Little Red Riding Hood" or "Cinderella". List the class' major ideas on the chalkboard in a word or phrase lengths. Challenge the students to write these ideas into a summary paragraph by building each short idea into a full sentence.

3. A fact is a bit of information that may be proven. An opinion though it may be based on fact is a statement of an individual's thinking about that item.
   A. Give the class a list of general terms such as bank, truck, run. Have the students write an opinion statement and then a factual statement related to each term. Give the students an opportunity to share their facts and opinions with one another.

Writing Composition Enhances Reading Comprehension

B. With the class brainstorm a list of things about which the students feel strongly. Ask the students to select one item and write their opinion about it. Have them anticipate what the opposition might say against them. Suggest they support their opinion with facts where possible.